Solutions to Indigenous Personal Barriers From the Author's Perspective

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Abstract

Providing pathways to Indigenous student success in Canada has proven difficult for educators over the past decade. Many Indigenous voices have been heard since the Truth and Reconciliation has become headline news, but most Western educators do not yet have the knowledge and understanding to properly teach culturally accurate and appropriate lessons, including the current and historical implications of residential schools. On a daily basis, Indigenous students face barriers such as mental illness, disengagement from the educational system, and a loss of culture. As such, providing school staff with cultural sensitivity training, focusing on the strengths of our Indigenous students with compassion and love, and inviting Elders and Indigenous resource workers to collaborate in lesson planning are all viable solutions to increase the success of our Indigenous students.

The work of teaching Indigenous students in Canada is a work of history reborn. How to accommodate the success of Indigenous students in Canada has been a debated topic for educators, parents, and community groups for the past decade (Dion, 2016). To add to this dilemma, school policy, legislation, and media further convolute our preconceived notions of how Indigenous students look, speak, behave, and learn (Gebhard, 2018). We are at a societal crossroads: a path of oppression crossing a path of transparency. Our action (or inaction) can increase or inhibit the success of our Indigenous students. Educators, administrators, and people of power have the means to investigate colonial oppression and the inherent racism on which our country was built, and thrives (Dion, 2016). It is imperative that teachers address the following problem areas for Indigenous students: mental illness, disengagement from the educational system, and loss of culture by way of the Indian Act, perpetuated by current teaching practices (Mancuso, 2018). These problems influence educators' ability to help these students reach their full potential. Fortunately, there are several solutions to these educational problems, not limited to sensitivity training for school staff, providing compassion and love for Indigenous students, and inviting Elders and Indigenous resource workers to take part in school-based program-planning and teaching opportunities on a continuous basis.

Mental Health

Mental illness is a barrier to the success of contemporary Indigenous students. Industrial and residential schools have created terrifying and long-lasting physical and mental-health implications for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Although the students in my 3rd grade class have a diluted understanding of the implications of Truth and Reconciliation, some have been brought up by parents who witnessed the pain and suffering of their own mothers and fathers. The historical effects of colonial oppression are linked to higher rates of substance abuse, domestic violence, PTSD, and suicidality in Indigenous families (Mancuso, 2018). When children experience family trauma and illness, their ability to perform academically is diminished (Mancuso, 2018). I can speak to this first hand through the lived experiences of my own family and upbringing. The cycle of pain has lasted four generations and, although I pray it ends with me, I know that my children will hear the stories of their great-grandmother and grandfather, question our familial illness, and fear its emergence in themselves and in their own children of mixed Indigenous and European heritages. Mental illness as a result of cultural genocide goes beyond an educational problem; it is an educational epidemic.

A solution to the problem of poor mental-health in Indigenous students is sensitivity training for administrators, counsellors, resource teachers, and teachers. It would invite school staff to recognize issues that our students present and how to remedy them. Indigenous sensitivity training covers topics such as treaty land, historical policies surrounding Indigenous Peoples, current trends in Indigenous education, and community outreach members (Farrell, 2004). I attended a sensitivity training session in 2017 here in Brandon. Educators were given the opportunity to attend, but unfortunately I was the only staff member from my school who attended. It was a truly eye-opening experience. Attendees spent the day listening to the Brandon Indigenous Peoples Council and taking part in activities, role-plays, and polls on topics relevant to relationship-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. By and large, the greatest benefit from attending this session was how to address Indigenous families in school. As explained by an Elder, schools are not a happy place for Indigenous families. The legacy of residential schools is very much alive in our school-aged children, and some parents feel guarded when coming into the school. By beginning school assemblies, pep-rallies, and PTA meetings with an acknowledgement to being on Treaty 2 land, or having an Elder present to give a blessing, we are validating that our schools are built on lands that have been borrowed from Indigenous Peoples (Tupper, 2014) whose children attend our schools. Validating and connecting our students and families creates avenues for school staff to recognize and remedy mental-health issues that may arise. Sensitivity training for school staff would do much to increase successful Indigenous student education.

Disengagement

Disengagement from the educational system is a barrier to the success of Indigenous students, and a problem that will in turn influence the likelihood of seeing Indigenous educators in the classroom. Indigenous students in Canada are lagging behind the success rates of other cultural populations (Olsen Harper & Thompson, 2017). It is grossly unacceptable that less than half of Indigenous high-school students in Manitoba graduate, while nearly all of their non-Indigenous peers do (Office of the Auditor General, Manitoba, as cited in Olsen Harper & Thompson, 2017, pp. 42-43). If schools do not have an Indigenous Education Counsellor, Indigenous students may not see a single adult working in their school who represents their own cultural background. Although I am an Indigenous educator, my Mi'kmaq background is very different from those of the students in my building. In this regard, I do not represent the vast majority of my Indigenous students. I do not practise the same beliefs, our Creation stories differ, we do not share a common Treaty land, and I cannot speak to the experiences of their ancestors. Indigenous students are leaving school before graduating due to "boredom" and "pregnancy" (Statistics Canada, as cited in Charleyboy, 2017, para. 8), and little can be done to provide an avenue for Indigenous students to see their own backgrounds and beliefs represented in their schools. This is a cyclical problem; school divisions cannot hire Indigenous educators when so few Indigenous students are completing secondary education, let alone post-secondary school.

The cheapest, most readily available solutions to Indigenous student disengagement are compassion and love. I can speak to one of my most precious 3rd grade students whom I will call Alicia. The transition notes that came to me in June of 2018 listed all of Alicia's deficits. Her suspected FASD had neatly placed her in a box of negatives: poor attendance, failing in math and literacy, poor speech, chronic inattention, and the inability to build appropriate friendships. To be sure, Alicia is the most vulnerable student in my 2018-19 class of 25. Alicia comes to me (almost) every morning incapable of following our class rules and routines. Her mother works at night and subsequently sleeps during the day, so Alicia is not always properly dressed for the weather, or fed before coming to school. She lacks the executive functioning skills to make sure she is prepared for the day.

By simply treating Alicia with love and compassion first and foremost, I am able to celebrate her when she comes to school, which is happening more often. She may not remember to put her indoor shoes on, but she comes into the classroom (after giving me a big hug), grabs a book, and sinks into the safe and caring place our classroom provides her. It has taken a while, but Alicia is making great strides in her learning. I have made a conscious effort to focus on the positives, and when Alicia is present I love her and thank her for coming to school. She is becoming more engaged and willing to take risks with her learning, and she is seeing the power she holds within. If educators can flip from a deficit-based view of their students to a strength-based perspective, we can begin to celebrate the small pebbles of learning that will eventually stack as high as a mountain (Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, & Hughes, 2010). Compassion and love are a solution to Indigenous student disengagement.

Loss of Culture

A final educational barrier to Indigenous student success is a loss of culture. The Indian Act did much to alter the lives of Indigenous Peoples of Canada. Residential schools and the 60s Scoop were actions obviously designed to eradicate a culture (Barnes & Josefowitz, 2018). Celebrating events such as Orange Shirt Day, National Aboriginal Day and Louis Riel Day, and developing Indigenous resource sections in our school libraries, are insufficient gestures. Simply teaching students about the Seven Grandfather Teachings or Turtle Island will not remediate the barriers our Indigenous students face (Gebhard, 2018). White privilege lives through our inability to teach anti-Indigenous racism, because many educators do not explicitly address the colonial racism (Tupper, 2014) that Indigenous Peoples continue to endure. Simply talking about residential schools stigmatizes Indigenous students by the perception that their ancestors were in the wrong place at the wrong time, not victims of genocide. A racist narrative is propagated through continued whitewashing of Indigenous cultural teachings, giving cause to issues facing Indigenous students (Gebhard, 2018). As both an educator and a student viewing the world through a European and Indigenous perspective, I have witnessed that historical oppression is reinforced in our classrooms, and a loss of culture is a barrier to the success of Indigenous students.

Inviting Elders and Indigenous resource workers into schools on a continuous basis to assist in program-planning is a solution to the inaccuracy of current pedagogical practices surrounding Indigenous teaching. Riverheights School has a BSSAP (Building Student Success with Aboriginal Parents) worker every other day. She is a valued and trusted member of our learning community. On the days she is at Riverheights, she is our go-to when it comes to liaising with Indigenous families and students. She meets with students in her caseload and goes out of her way to provide them with a safe place in the school. We also have Elders, such as Amie Martin, and Frank and Kevin Tacan, who come to our school to make connections, share culturally appropriate lessons with the students, and inspire our Indigenous students to carry on the tradition of cultural learning (Manitoba Education, 2007). Martin has provided our school with a plethora of text-sets, kits, videos, and activities that address Truth and Reconciliation from an accurate and Indigenous-centered approach, and Frank and Kevin Tacan make frequent visits at teachers' request (Tupper, 2014). Through the mentoring and leadership of these wonderful people, educators in our building can safely and accurately teach our students culturally appropriate lessons about the historical past of Indigenous Peoples. It would be most beneficial to provide our students constant contact with these integral figures in all schools. Directly involving Indigenous resource workers and Elders in school-based program-planning is a solution to the problem of whitewashing our teaching of Canadian history.

A Personal Perspective

Having grown up as a student facing these barriers, I appreciate the solutions for increasing Indigenous student success. My grandmother denied her heritage until she was in her senior years, our family experienced poor mental health, disengagement with the school system, and misrepresentation of who our people are. Having left the banks of the Miramichi for Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, my grandmother and her family experienced a life much different from back home. My great-grandmother, having spent her life as an orphan, a spinster, and a servant, finally married a white man and had 13 children. Her sons were able to attend school in Qu'Appelle; her daughters were not. In addition, "mixed breed" females were often sexually mistreated by European men in the area. Having denied her heritage until her elder years, my grandmother spoke out about the sexual abuse that she and her sisters faced in Saskatchewan, and how the men in her family became increasingly plagued by alcohol and what she would now call depression. She was also able to admit that her mother had no idea how to parent and, in turn, she felt a deep sadness in her inability to raise her own children, including my father. Like my father before me, I have personally battled with addiction and poor mental health, failed academically, and dropped out of high school. My own turning point came when I finally hit "rock bottom" and perceived that I had two choices: to fulfil everyone's abysmal expectations of me or to prove them wrong. I now recognize how lucky I am to have defeated those tremendous odds, statistically speaking.

Conclusion

Successfully teaching our Indigenous students is a problem for educators, with no signs of slowing down. The school-aged population of Indigenous Peoples is booming (Paquette & Fallon, 2010), yet our pedagogical practices are not keeping up. Decreased mental health, lack of school connections, and the loss of culture and language are barriers that inhibit Indigenous students from reaching their fullest potential in Canadian schools. Solutions to these barriers to Indigenous student success, including cultural sensitivity training for school-staff, treating Indigenous students with compassion and love, and inviting Elders and Indigenous resource workers into our schools to assist in program-planning, will build a school culture of validation and respect, which is what our Indigenous students deserve.

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About the Author

Ellana Armstrong is a 3rd grade teacher in Brandon, and an M.Ed. student at Brandon University. Her work focuses on special education, specifically meeting the needs of Indigenous students. Her Metis background has ignited her passion to study the fusion of Indigenous and European cultures in Canadian schools.